

AlbertMohler.com

Looking Back at 'The Mystery of Marriage'—Part One

Well, at least I know how to strike a nerve. Earlier this year, I delivered a major address on marriage to the 2004 New Attitude Conference organized by Joshua Harris, author of influential books like I Kissed Dating Goodbye and Not Even a Hint. Now, a few months later, that message seems something like a bomb with a delay-action fuse. Those attending the conference seemed to receive the message with great appreciation, but in recent days a rather significant reaction has come from those who take issue with what I had to say.

Thursday, August 19, 2004

Well, at least I know how to strike a nerve. Earlier this year, I delivered a major address on marriage to the 2004 New Attitude Conference organized by Joshua Harris, author of influential books like I Kissed Dating Goodbye and Not Even a Hint. Now, a few months later, that message seems something like a bomb with a delay-action fuse. Those attending the conference seemed to receive the message with great appreciation, but in recent days a rather significant reaction has come from those who take issue with what I had to say.

Speaking on “The Mystery of Marriage,” I tried to address the modern crisis of marriage from a biblical point of view. With marriage in eclipse—both in the culture and in some sectors of the church—I sounded an alarm directed specifically at young single adults who, by their very attendance at this conference, already showed that they shared this concern. With background issues including controversy over same-sex marriage, rampant divorce, and demographic trends indicating significant dangers for the institution of marriage, I went back to the basics.

Drawing from the creation account and other significant biblical passages, I sought to demonstrate that the Bible presents a conception of marriage that goes far beyond what most persons have even imagined. According to the Bible, marriage is not primarily about our self-esteem and personal fulfillment, nor is it just one lifestyle option among others. The Bible is clear in presenting a picture of marriage that is rooted in the glory of God made evident in creation itself. The man and the woman are made for each other and the institution of marriage is given to humanity as both opportunity and obligation.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible assumes that marriage is normative for human beings. The responsibilities, duties, and joys of marriage are presented as matters of spiritual significance. From a Christian perspective, marriage must never be seen as a mere human invention—an option for those who choose such a high level of commitment—for it is an arena in which God’s glory is displayed in the right ordering of the man and the woman, and their glad reception of all that marriage means, gives, and requires.

Clearly, something has gone badly wrong in our understanding of marriage. This is not only reflected in much of the conversation and literature about marriage found in the secular world, but in many Christian circles as well. The undermining of marriage—or at least its reduction to something less than the biblical concept—is also evident in the way many Christians marry, and in the way others fail to marry.

In the larger culture of confusion, marriage is seen by some persons as an option for those who “need” it. Radical feminists have attacked marriage as a hopelessly patriarchal institution, binding women to home and family in what Betty Friedan called “domestic captivity.” A revolution in the law has made divorce easy and quick, undermining the marital bond and redefining marriage as a tentative commitment. Some of these who desire marriage are driven by the wrong desires. Some are looking for social benefits as others see marriage as a form of self-expression. By any measure, marriage is in trouble.

All this cries out for biblical correction, and Christians must resist the accommodationist temptation to accept the marginalization of marriage. This generation of young Christians must lead the way in the recovery of the biblical vision, and build a Christian counter-culture that puts marriage back at the center of human life and Christian living. The young people who attended the New Attitude Conference represent a great hope for such a recovery. The heart-felt yearning for marriage so movingly communicated by those who have sent me such pointed responses to my message indicates that these young Christians are also committed to be agents of such a Christian recovery.

There is one significant qualification about marriage found in the Scriptures. In 1 Corinthians chapter seven, the Apostle Paul writes specifically about the gift of celibacy, offering a clear teaching for those who are given this special gift in order to be liberated for strategic Gospel service. Paul's point is clear. The obligations that are part and parcel of marriage are a matter of deep spiritual responsibility. A Christian who is married is, under the obligations of that sacred institution, less free to seize some opportunities for ministry that would be open to one who is unmarried. Paul celebrates the gift of celibacy for Christian service, but he says nothing about those who simply would choose singleness as a lifestyle option. His concern was to see the Gospel preached throughout the world, even as the moral reputation of the Corinthian congregation was restored on matters of marriage and sexuality.

Furthermore, Paul speaks very specifically about the sexual aspect of marriage and instructs, "it is better to marry than to burn with passion." [1 Corinthians 7:9, NASB] I appreciate Paul's apostolic candor. He did not condemn sexual desire and sexual passion, but he directed the Corinthians—and us—to marriage as the proper arena for such passion to be expressed.

With all this in view, it would seem that the Bible offers two specific teachings about marriage that should frame our understanding and our engagement in the current debate. First, marriage is presented as a sacred institution, a covenant made between the man and the woman before their Creator, and an arena in which the glory of God is demonstrated to the watching world through the goodness of the marital relationship, the one-flesh character of the marital bond, the holiness of marital sex, and the completeness that comes with the gift of children. Second, the Bible presents celibacy as a gift—apparently a rare gift—that is granted to some believers in order that they would be liberated for special service in Christ's name. Paul's discussion of celibacy indicates that this gift is marked by the absence of lust and sexual desire that would compromise or complicate ministry as an unmarried person. Accordingly, those who have been given the gift of celibacy find in Christ the satisfactions others are given through marriage.

Paul privileges this gift of celibacy, stating that he would have many of the Corinthians demonstrate this gift and "remain even as I." [1 Cor. 7:8] Yet, most Christians in every age have been married—not celibate. Marriage has represented the norm for adult Christians in every generation since the time of Paul's writing. This is consistent with the purposes of marriage as laid out in the biblical pattern, and is acknowledged by Paul in numerous passages dealing with husbands and wives, parents and children, and qualifications for church leaders. Celibacy is a wonderful gift—a gift the whole church should celebrate—but it is a rare gift.

Now, to the hard part. Demographic trends, cultural shifts, and a weakening of the biblical concept of marriage have produced a situation in which marriage is in big trouble, even among many Christians. Divorce must be listed first among the ills that have befallen marriage in recent decades, but at the New Attitude Conference I was asked to address young singles who had not yet married. While the problem of divorce must always be acknowledged and confronted with biblical truth, in speaking to never-married single Christians my purpose was to point them to the glory of God in the comprehensive goodness of marriage. Speaking to that audience, I addressed a problem much closer at hand.

By any calculation, the statistics indicate that young adults are marrying much later in life than at any time in recent human history. As a matter of fact, demographers have suggested that this new pattern of delay in marriage has established a statistical pattern that in previous generations had been most closely associated with social crises like war and natural disaster.

Here are the plain facts: According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the first marriage for a white male is now at age 27.5. For white females, the age is slightly lower. This amounts to a delay that often has devastating consequences. With puberty coming at earlier ages than ever before—certainly in the early teens for most Americans—the period of time between sexual maturity and marriage is now stretching out into something like an average of ten to fifteen years. The accompanying statistics related to premarital sexual activity parallel the statistics related to the delay of marriage. Can anyone be surprised?

Other problems are closely associated with this delay of marriage. Speaking to this group of Christian young people—an outstanding group of young Christian disciples and leaders—I pointed to what sociologists now describe as “extended adolescence”—a period of life that now is extended well into the twenties and even early thirties by many young adults, often young men, who have trouble making the transition to adulthood. I urged these young Christians to seize the biblical concept of marriage and all of its glory, to understand that God has set this covenant before them as expectation, and to channel their energies toward getting married, staying married, and showing God’s glory in those marriages.

I shared with those who attended the conference my concern that this delay—the deliberate putting off of marriage even among some who intend some day to be married—was “the sin I think besets this generation.” Continuing, I also made clear that this is primarily a problem that should be laid at the feet of young men. While some young women may neglect the call of marriage, a far greater problem is the unwillingness of many young men to grow up, take responsibility, lead, and find the woman God would have them to marry. As a rule, young women show far greater commitment to marriage, far greater maturity about marriage, and far greater frustration about the fact that marriage has been delayed. I thought I had made that point clearly—but perhaps not.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

